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ABSTRACT

A management by objectives approach to evaluation develops performance objectives as a means of minimizing the bias related to individual judgment. This paper focuses on three variables which contribute to the presence of subjectivity in performance evaluation. The first of these is psychological and includes such factors as judgment, power relationships, and the influence of rumor. If "getting along with others," a category which can only be judged subjectively, is omitted as a performance objective, assessment is neglected on the criterion most often at the heart of dismissal. Judgment also enters the evaluation process when performance objectives are being set, and when assessing how well the administrator has achieved his objectives. The second variable which contributes to subjectivity is the atmosphere of the college. Socioeconomic and political variables must provide adequate time for the long and demanding evaluation process, and the atmosphere of the college must favor those who participate. Third, factors external to the college, e.g., laws which mandate achievement of balance in ethnic or sex categories, and supply and demand of administrators play a subtle , but significant, role in reducing objectivity. (NHM)

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THE MYTH OF RATIONAL EVALUATION*

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The presence of caprice and prejudice in the evaluation process has been an undeniable source of anxiety, frustration and resentment for those haplessly afflicted by the consequences of such irrational factors. The development of Management by Objectives (MBO) has been a major attempt to provide a more rational method of evaluation. Management by Objectives has required that job duties and responsibilities be specified in behavioral terms which serve as objective criteria for rating job performance.

That rational evaluation can be facilitated by the use of performance objectives is an assumption with which I agree. Yet, an assumption it is, with logic and belief to support it, but scant empirical evidence. It remains to be demonstrated that performance evaluation is more objective and rational than other forms of evaluation. I have used performance evaluation in the appraisal of counselors for the past six years. It is as a result of this experience, in addition to a perusal of the literature, that I believe there are inherent limitations in the use of performance evaluation, limitations which make rational evaluation using performance objectives a myth.

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The point of this paper is not primarily to prescribe for you how to evaluate administrators for whom you have responsibility, but to explore with you the reasons for the continued existence of subjectivity, since it seems to be easy to drift into the comfort of thinking that because we are using performance evaluation, we are, therefore, being objective. Actually, a recent conversation alerted me to the kind of trap into which our language leads us. An administrator was explaining to several others that he was glad he had begun to use MBO because he was now being objective with his faculty. When asked to explain, he responded that because the goals were discussed and written down, that made the evaluation process objective. What is happening in our thinking, it appears to me, is that many administrators are assuming that the process of MBO, which has the look of objectivity, ipso facto renders the product objective. In actuality, neither is.

Harold Koontz includes lack of objectivity in his quite thorough list of disadvantages of the MBO process which appears in his 1971 book, Appraising Managers as Managers. But Koontz and other authors who have recognized lack of objectivity as a drawback in the use of MBO have provided little discussion for the reasons for the presence of subjectivity.

In this article, I would like to focus on three variables which contribute to the presence of subjectivity in performance evaluation. The first of these is psychological and includes such factors as judgment, power relationships, and the influence

of rumor. Second is the atmosphere of the college. Third are factors external to the college. Let's look first at psychological factors.

I. Psychological Factors

It needs to be stressed that measurement and evaluation are not synonymous. Measurement can be value free and objective, as when ten people use a yardstick to measure the size of a desk. (I am aware that the use of a yardstick implies a value for a particular system of measurement, but that is another issue.) Evaluation is never value free, nor thoroughly objective. Evaluation means to judge the worth of, to estimate the importance to, etc., and the evaluation processes are always pervaded by human judgment, with all the attendant bias and prejudice implied by that term.

If we have learned anything about the nature of man's thinking in the past 2,000 years, it is that Aristotle was wrong in his observation that man is a rational animal. Rather, it is more accurate to state that man is a rationalizing animal who, though he strives to be rational, yet must be wary of the implications of rationalization, that seductive pathway of illogic which hides wishes, desires and prejudices under a cloak of rational-like behavior, with reason dragged along to justify actions.

Perhaps MBO may be viewed as an elaborate and complex example of our ability to rationalize. Granted, the extent to which this statement has validity is not determinable,

but I would suggest that it has greater validity in those functions and activities which are not tied directly to concrete outcomes. Higher education easily qualifies as an endeavor in which outcomes are not readily measured and the outcomes of administrators in higher education are, at best, vague. Performance objectives are developed as a means for making all parties aware of the basis for evaluation in an effort to minimize the bias related to individual judgment--clearly a step in the right direction, since goals can be set, progress assessed, and "personality factors" minimized. But it seems we have set for ourselves a dilemma, which derives from the estimation that as many as 90% of those who are dismissed from their jobs are not dismissed for lack of technical skills or competency, or because they failed to meet their performance objectives, but because of what is broadly referred to as "an inability to get along with others."

It cannot reasonably be questioned that the assessment of "getting along with others" is fraught with the frailty of human judgment. If "getting along with others" is included as a performance objective, large doses of judgment are introduced into the evaluation process; if "getting along with others" is omitted as a performance objective, assessment is being neglected on the criterion most often found at the heart of dismissal--thus the dilemma. I would suggest that assessment can and should be made on this crucial variable, but only using a broad-based formal input from faculty, staff and colleagues, as well as from supervisors, thereby reducing the

greater potential for bias and prejudice from a single source of input. Formal input I would classify as information which is clearly defined as to the source and available to the person being evaluated.

Judgment must also enter the evaluation process when the performance objectives are being established. After all, at least two people must agree that a particular objective is reasonable, appropriate and at least partially attainable. The negotiation process implied in coming to such an agreement requires judgments from both parties which are far removed from measurement.

Probably the severest limitation in the use of performance evaluation emanates from the issue of quality control, i.e., how well did the administrator achieve his objectives. Higher education has virtually no sound means of assessing quality of an administrator qua administrator. To illustrate, suppose two Deans in a college present the President with objectives for the year. The objectives of one Dean are modest, and it appears to both the Dean and the President that he should be able to attain them. The other Dean presents an ambitious list of objectives, and it is clear that he will probably not attain all of them. If the first Dean with the more modest list achieves all of his goals at the end of the year, while the second Dean achieves only 80% of his goals, is the first Dean to be compared unfavorably to the second, or is the second Dean to be compared unfavorably to the first? "Neither," you say, "this is not norm-referenced assessment:"

Although performance evaluation is said by many to be accomplished without reference to others (i.e., it is criterion referenced), I believe one must always have in mind some type of norm when evaluating. Thus, the Deans will be compared. But that issue aside, the President is faced with the judgment of quality when the objectives are said to be "modest" or "ambitious," and even more clearly so when it comes time to consider "how well." Merely to check off each objective without reference to how effectively it was achieved is to engage in a perfunctory and superficial process. Yet, when you judge "how well," you have, by that very fact, lessened the objectivity of performance evaluation. Another dilemma supporting the myth, it seems.

As a stated advantage of MBO, mutual goal setting encourages greater involvement and commitment, and allegedly improves satisfaction with the final evaluation. What is often overlooked, however, is the effect of the formal power relationship which exists between the administrator and his supervisor, and between the administrator and those he evaluates. The way in which a power relationship can potentially erode the rationality of evaluation evolves from the manner in which the evaluator handles the power he has. The President must continually be aware of the extent to which he forms negative (especially negative) impressions based on what he perceives as "challenges to my authority as President." Both persons are cognizant of this authority and concomitant power, and the entire process of MBO can become a vapid ritual

should the President not also be alert to the implications of this power as it relates to performance evaluation.

Let me illustrate with an Academic Dean who is acquiescent to the President--friendly, smiling, courteous, even obsequious, yet to those over whom power is held, he becomes demanding, discourteous, intrusive--in short, tyrannical. Because the Dean is acquiescent to power, he is not likely to seriously challenge the President's views during a so-called "mutual" goal-setting session. On a more subtle level, if the Dean is asked to develop his own set of objectives, the list will most likely reflect the Dean's perception of what the President wants to hear. This is only one example, of course, and since few colleges admit to having administrators with an authoritarian personality, it may not be especially timely!

The third major factor in the psychological arena which militates against rational evaluation is rumor. It has, of course, been the case historically and is, I suspect, still the case, that the single factor contributing most to evaluation has been information based on rumor. By rumor, I mean what is often called "informal feedback," i.e., a phone call, private conversation, letter, conversation at lunch, passing comments in the hall or from a citizen in a taxi, etc., all of which remain unknown to the person being evaluated. It is also true that rumor with a positive thrust contributes to a beneficial "halo effect." Thus, rumor and performance evaluation may be discrepant in a manner which inflates or

deflates, but in either case, distorts objectivity. Evaluation of administrators via performance objectives does not eliminate rumor as an input source, it merely serves to counteract some of the more invidious aspects of rumor. What does the evaluator do with this information when he receives it? Most of us who are human find ourselves unable to ignore it when considering the overall evaluation of an employee. If this is true, then rational evaluation through performance objectives is further undermined.

II. Atmosphere of the College

As if the psychological factors mentioned were not sufficient in their inherent detraction from a thoroughly rational evaluation, the general atmosphere within the college can also diminish objectivity. By general atmosphere, I refer to structural or organizational factors, or, if you will, socio-economic and political variables occuring within the college. If there is not sufficient money to provide adequate time for the long and demanding MBO process, then a pro forma experience occurs.

An atmosphere which favors (rewards) those who participate is also necessary, and this must emanate from the President. But the college atmosphere is equally affected by the Faculty Senate or unions, student groups, and the Board of Trustees. Further, if the college has traditionally been resistant to change, implementation of performance evaluation may again be only perfunctory.

On the other hand, a college atmosphere which is conducive to openness, a striving toward rationality and general acceptance of change will facilitate the use of performance evaluation. To induce a positive atmosphere, I would suggest a rarely used tactic -- one in which the top level administrators share with persons who report to them their own objectives. How many Presidents provide the people who report to them with copies of their objectives? How many Deans share their objectives with Division Directors? I believe this tactic would provide an openness as well as a model that would greatly facilitate the entire MBO process.

III. External Factors

Factors external to the college also play a role in the diminution of objectivity in performance evaluation. For example, laws which mandate achievement of balance in ethnic and/or sex categories play a subtle, but, I think, significant part. So does supply and demand. Theoretically, it can be argued that they should not, since the criteria for evaluation should only relate to the job performance regardless of whether balance is achieved or whether there are few or many applicants for the job. But on a practical level, such a high degree of objectivity is seldom achieved. To illustrate, when the market is short on administrative talent, objectives may be less demanding and rigorous, and, perhaps more important, the achieving or non-achieving of the established objectives may not play a role in the

determination of whether the administrator will be kept or dismissed. Conversely, when administrative talent is in plentiful supply, objectives may be more demanding and greater attention is given to high quality performance.

In a similar way, the nature of the objectives, the evaluation of achievement of objectives, and decisions based on such evaluation are often significantly affected by attempts to achieve an ethnic or sex balance in administrative positions. (This is not to argue that such extra-college factors are any less worthwhile, but merely to point out that here again objective evaluation is further hampered.)

In summary, I have tried to provide an analysis of the nature and conditions of the subjectivity which continues to pervade the evaluation process. It may be that the use of Management by Objectives can serve to diminish caprice and prejudice during evaluation, but the limitations of this technique must be recognized if maximum benefits are to be realized.

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